What Your Members Are Thinking In A COVID-19 WORLD

Tracking Attitudes Toward Back-to-Normal

By Jon Last

For me, the world as I knew it began to change dramatically on March 12 of this year. I was in Las Vegas for the NCAA PAC 12 men's basketball tournament, which had just been cancelled after the announcement that two NBA players had contracted COVID-19. Like dominoes, sports and leisure activities and venues began to shut down. We all felt the aftershocks. Our client base was in lockdown. It was as if the earth had stopped rotating.

Fortunately, for the club industry and for our research firm, resiliency and the ability to quickly pivot are inbred levers to continued success and relevance. For me and my company, thoughts immediately turned to the horrific events of 9/11. At that time I had recently joined The Golf Digest Companies, where my overall marketing responsibilities included oversight of our insights and research department. In the wake of tragic disruptions to normalcy, people are seeking clarity. Consumer sentiment can change on a dime, and those organizations armed with the foresight of customer perceptions and needs are best equipped to proactively respond to crisis. Post-9/11, the key questions were similar to those that every consumer-facing business was asking in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic shutdown: "When will things be back to normal?" "How do we restore confidence so that our customers return?" and "What will the new normal look like?" Both in 2001 and 2020 the road to these answers was through rigorous research.

Given how fast coronavirus-related news was unfolding, Sports & Leisure Research Group partnered with two other firms to launch the "Back to Normal Barometer," an ongoing attitudinal tracking study with a representative sample of affluent and highly active Americans, among others to track:

- How long Americans expect the national emergency to continue
- What conditions need to be met to for things to feel "normal again"
- What constitutes "all clear"—so that people are confident that it is safe to resume leisure activities again
- What steps do people expect companies to take to ensure their personal safety and communicate that the steps have been taken

Deploying a methodological mix of twice monthly surveys, in-depth consumer one-on-one interviews, online sentiment tracking and moment-by-moment message effectiveness testing, we've pulsed consumer behaviors and attitudes since late March. We've listened to the literal "voice of the customer" to understand the human impact of the current COVID-19 crisis, and how it affects their present state of mind, future expectations and needed reassurances. Our breadth of inquiry has given us windows into 16 different verticals and 14 different sports, constantly evolving to reflect the ever changing environment. The implications are profound and potentially transformative for the club industry. Here's a look at some of what we've discovered.

A Nation of Waning Confidence and Mounting Concern

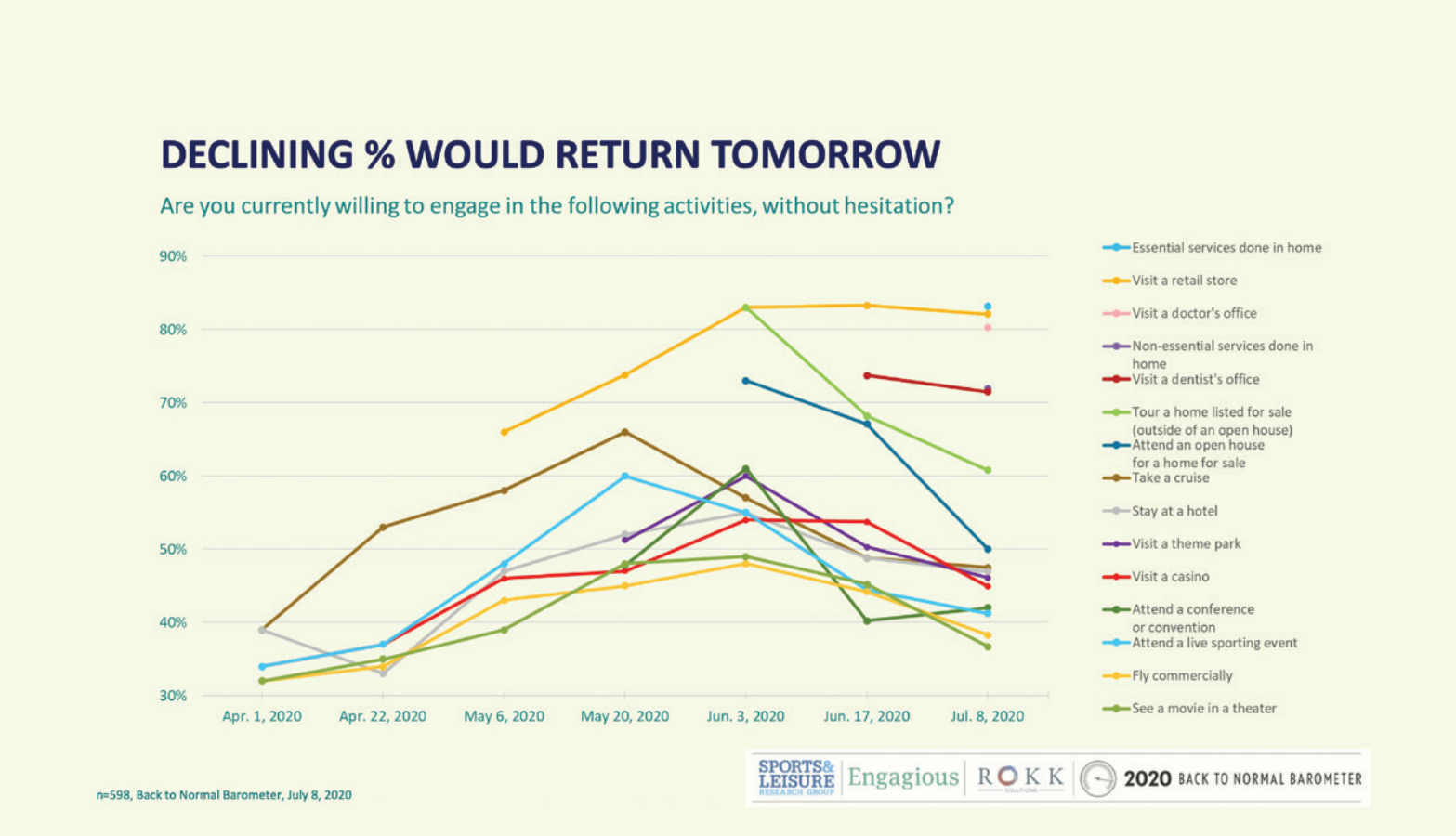
Consumer sentiment is fluid, and two major components of our research have been an aggregate Confidence Barometer/Index and what we've called The Matrix of Concerns. The Confidence Barometer is an aggregation and resulting summary algorithm of some 26 attitudinal statements that measure sentiment about current national conditions and future expectations surrounding the macro economy, pursuit of leisure and travel activities, personal spending and outlook for retirement. We've tracked sentiment across many of these statements for more than 20 years as part of our annual golfer attitudinal research. In the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 shutdowns, our barometer showed just over a quarter of Americans feeling very good about what was going on. In context, this was significantly lower than what we had observed immediately after 9/11.

The barometer gradually increased through April and May. People's concerns became more fixated on the national economy rather than the threat of the public health crisis. Even after heighted social unrest, confidence continued to inch forward, buffeted by the gradual easing and opening of many leisure venues and potentially positive economic news. Societal concerns significantly outweighed personal concerns. Unfortunately, in late June as reported spikes in COVID-19 cases became the pervasive media narrative, the sentiment fell back to late March and early April levels through the month of July.

The sentiment data has not been all bad. Throughout the study, there have been significant variations across multiple demographic variables and local circumstances that significantly outweigh the national picture. In April and May, while COVID-19 cases were concentrated in several pockets of the country, concern was not as pervasive as it has been most recently, commensurate with reports of increased COVID-19 cases in wider swaths of the country. Throughout the research, most affluent and well-educated Americans, as well as those active in sports like golf and tennis, have tended to be more resilient, exhibiting greater confidence about the future and greater willingness to adapt to the present.

Ready to Go's Vs. Breakthroughs

Americans have consistently fallen into three distinct attitudinal segments, two of which dominate the distribution. Those deemed "Ready to Go" are willing to reengage with a variety of leisure activities in which they participated during the past year. For some activities like shopping at retail stores, attending a sporting event/participating in various sports or visiting a casino, those who indicated that they were ready to do so without hesitation or further assurance rose from about a third to more than half by early June. As more venues opened, this segment splintered to now include those who have re-engaged within the past month. However, amidst some of the more negative recent news, the percentage of those "Ready to Go" has retrenched slightly, to just above where we were in early April.



On the opposite end are the roughly one-third to 40% of past year participants who fall into the "Breakthrough" segment. As the name suggests, these folks are uncomfortable and unlikely to resume activities absent the presence of a vaccine for COVID-19 or establishment of a proven medical protocol to mitigate its effects. In our most recent two waves of research through mid-July, the Breakthroughs began to grow somewhat to around 40% for several activities.

The smallest segment are those we've dubbed Assurance Seekers. Ranging from 15% to 20%, these folks are still looking for any combination of "all clear" assurances from a mix of mostly local medical and government officials, before they will be willing to reengage.

A Recipe For Normalcy

Our research delved into what clubs and other customer-facing businesses can do to assuage concerns. However, it's important to first gain a greater understanding of what is driving the present mindset among those who are not ready to go. We've found four main concerns:

1. **They are worried about a second wave of COVID-19:** Nearly two thirds of those in COVID-19-heavy states (the top 15 in new cases over a seven day period) and nearly six in 10 in the others, are very concerned that there will be a second outbreak requiring event cancellations and lockdowns this fall. It's undermining their desire to travel and creating hesitancy surrounding committing to social plans.
2. **They are worried about losing their jobs:** In mid-July, 47% of those surveyed were somewhat (16%) or strongly (31%) concerned. This represented a 10% increase from what was reported just three weeks prior.
3. **They are worried that the country is opening things up too quickly:** Amidst the increase in COVID cases across the U.S., more than half of all we spoke with shared this concern.
4. **They are concerned that we are not receiving clear guidance:** Nearly six in 10 strongly agreed that when it comes to avoiding COVID-19, they were getting mixed messages from both government and the media.

Assuaging many of these concerns can be best summarized with the prescriptive conclusion that amidst their worries, clubs must show their assurance-seeking members that their concerns are being addressed. With a perception that wisdom, certainty and trust are in short supply, clubs have the opportunity to provide that safe oasis. Our research has shown a consistent and pervasive belief that others are not being as diligent as they are in their adherence to safety and sanitization protocols. In the absence of clear guidance, one's confidence to reengage is tied to an ability to control the perceived health risk of a given experience. The challenge for club management is to enhance the semblance of personal control. Can you provide the certainty that people crave? In essence, the message is "You don't have to worry about others' behavior, here. We've got you covered."

Brass Tacks and Goldilocks

Our research also delved deeply into the impact of specific safety and sanitization protocols that could be deployed by clubs and other leisure venues towards the conclusions above. Most of these have likely become intuitive and pervasive by this time. People have come to accept the concept that staying six feet away from others, frequently sanitizing surfaces, washing one's hands and face and wearing masks when social distance can't be maintained, are table stakes. In the pursuit of greater assurance and control, respondents adhere to the "what you see is all there is" theory. If they see rigorous cleaning being done—preferably by professional third parties, rather than more questionable, less experienced staff—they will be more willing to reengage. They are comforted by visible and clear communication of the specific protocols that are being taken to assure that they are entering a safe and secure environment.

There have also been some interesting findings about masks. While 75% of respondents in the mid-July research agreed that wearing masks or facial coverings is worth doing to avoid a second shutdown of the economy in the fall, 40% of those who didn't travel for Fourth of July weekend cited a desire to consciously avoid going to places where masks were mandatory, as one of the motivations. And the mixed feelings about masks are less about political ideology than they are about the age of the individual. Older respondents have been nearly ubiquitous in their belief that masks should be worn to prevent spread of the disease. The difference in sentiment between Republicans and Democrats was much less pronounced. We conclude that people have grown to reluctantly accept the efficacy of masks. They believe that they can help. But they aren't eager to wear them.

The final word on creating a comfortable and controlled environment evokes the metaphor of Goldilocks. To paraphrase one of our qualitative respondents, "You don't want to be too hot. But you don't want to be too cold." CD

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